

PE1841/A

Scottish Government submission of 9 December 2020

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on this important petition on allowing designated visitors into care homes.

We know how difficult visiting restrictions have been on care home residents and their families throughout the pandemic and we understand it is only natural after nine months of lockdown restrictions, that care home residents and their loved ones will want to see and interact with each other as much as possible. The Cabinet Secretary has met families of Care Home Relatives Scotland on a number of occasions and she is committed to working with them and others to support further opportunities for visiting in care homes.

At the outset the Scottish Government's priority, at all times, has been the protection of life, especially among the more vulnerable citizens in our society. There are many factors that make the risks posed by Covid-19 significantly higher for care home residents and that is why a different relaxation of the restrictions between them and the general population has been necessary.

It is important that we strike a balance between the risks posed by the virus and the impact that visits that family visits have on the wellbeing of residents. In a constantly evolving and fast moving situation, that can be a difficult balance to strike and our guidance and recommendations remain under review as further scientific evidence becomes available to us.

Taking account of the evidence, we have taken a number of steps to support a phased return of visiting in care homes in Scotland. Our guidance, which was first published on 25 June, recommends that each resident has a designated visitor who is supported to see their loved one. We have regularly updated visiting guidance taking account of the COVID situation with a view to opening up more opportunities for families and friends to visit. In order to facilitate increased duration of visits and closeness during visits, on 12th October, we updated the guidance. The update encouraged care homes to support increased outdoor visits from up to six people for 30 minutes weekly and indoor visits weekly for up to four hours from one designated visitor. It also supports increased personal interaction between residents and loved ones, including hugs or hand holding, as long as strict infection prevention measures are met.

Separate guidance was issued on 3rd December, providing recommendations for care homes to help them support visiting over the Christmas and New Year period. It reiterated that care homes should have reinstated indoor visiting where it is safe to do so and that those who haven't should seek to do so urgently.

In order to increase confidence around visiting and add another layer of protection we are introducing lateral flow testing, which will be offered to designated visitors on the day of their visit. The roll-out of lateral flow testing began this week in 14 early adopter care homes across 5 local authority areas throughout Scotland.

We will use the key learning from the early adopter care homes to inform the wider roll-out; however, lateral flow testing kits will start to be delivered to all care homes from 14th December onwards, which is one month earlier than originally anticipated. It is important

that we get this right, that the training for care homes and visitors is clear and that local partners can provide the relevant support. Letters have been issued to care homes, stakeholders and the care homes relatives group to ensure that this is clearly communicated to designated visitors and families.

For any care homes that are unable to make use of lateral flow tests before Christmas, PCR testing of visitors will be available when necessary to facilitate visiting over the Christmas and New Year period.

Testing is a positive step for care homes, residents and their families and friends, that will provide another important layer of protection against COVID, alongside the essential PPE and infection prevention and control measures already in place.

You will also wish to note that in consultation with Directors of Public Health, Public Health Scotland and the Chief Medical Officer, we are now recommending that the period of closure to new admissions and visitors following an outbreak is reduced from 28 days to 14 days. This will mean that we avoid long periods when care homes are closed to visitors.

We will continue to actively consider how we can best support visiting in care homes, and protect those who are at most risk from this virus.